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Ellesmere and Axel Heiberg Island – A Natural Area of Canadian Significance

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Cover photo:
Several hundred glaciers, some up to 40 kilometres in length, are located in this Natural Area of Canadian Significance

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Ellesmere and Axel Heiberg Island– A Natural Area of Canadian Significance

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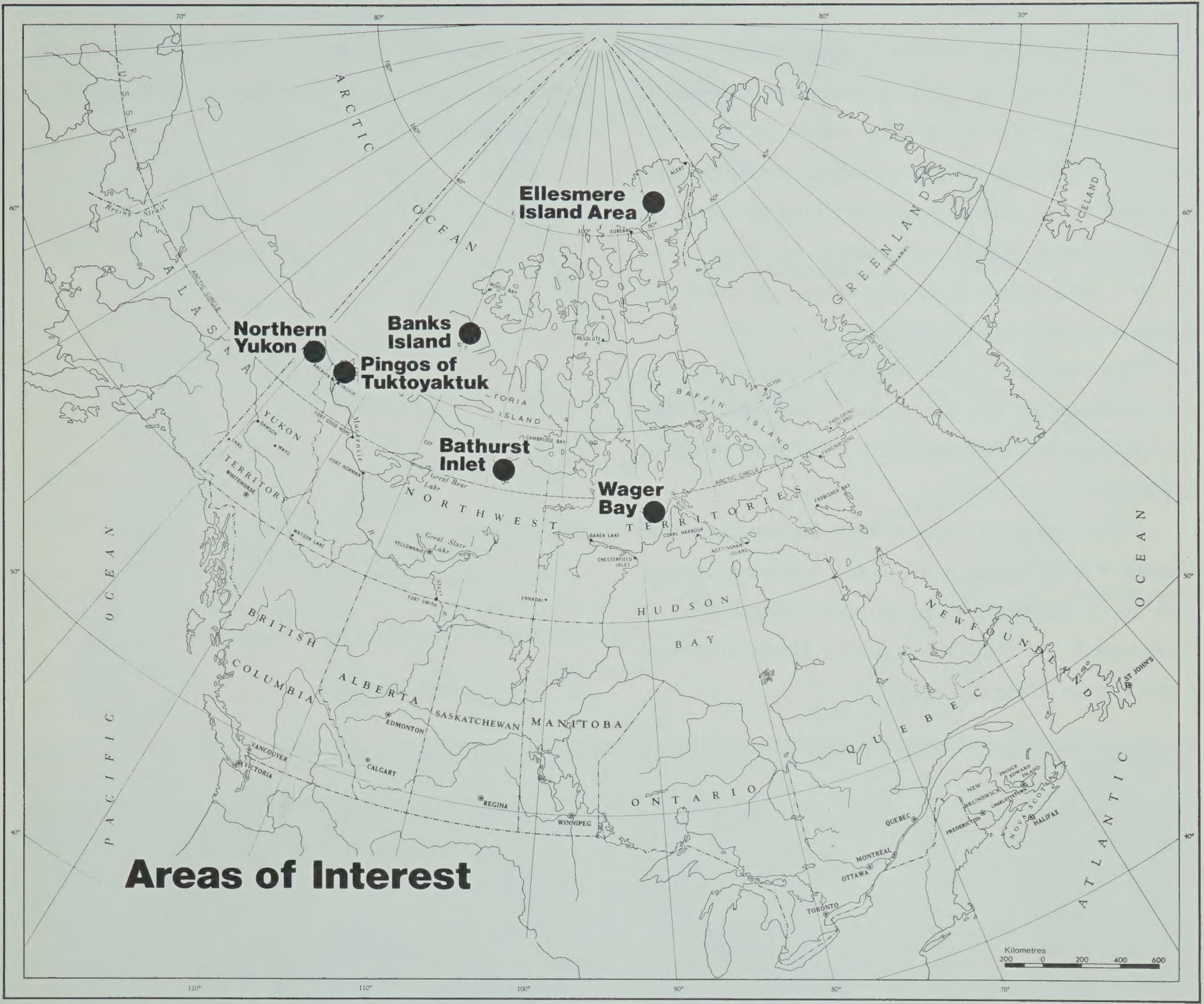
Introduction

Natural Areas of Canadian Significance are areas which have been identified for preservation in a natural state and are representative of the major natural environments of Canada. They are special places which should be protected as a part of the heritage of all Canadians, now and in the future. The identification and protection of our important natural heritage areas cannot await or accommodate the advances of competing land uses. Action is required while the opportunities exist if the heritage of the past is to be passed on to the future.

Of course, there are many, many different landscapes in Canada, each with its own unique features that inspire love and pride in the hearts of Canadians. To identify the variety of Canada's landscapes, Parks Canada has divided the country into 48 natural regions. It is the aim of Parks Canada to set aside, in each of the 48 regions, an area of outstanding scenery or distinct features, that best portrays the region. So far only 18 of the natural regions have representative parks. Of the 30 regions without parks, 15 are at least partly in the Yukon and the Northwest Territories. Parks Canada, in its effort to further the completion of the national system of parks, has recently identified 6 of the more impressive natural heritage areas worthy of consideration for new parks. They are:

1. Ellesmere and Axel Heiberg Islands
2. Wager Bay
3. Northern Yukon
4. Banks Island
5. Pingos of Tuktoyaktuk
6. Bathurst Inlet



Areas of Interest

The Site

Twenty-five hundred kilometres (1600 miles) northeast of Yellowknife lies Ellesmere Island, the most northerly lands in Canada. Dominated by mountains, fiords, icefields and glaciers these lands, together with an area on Axel Heiberg Island, are lands of long harsh winters and brief cool summers, of cold dry winds and very light snowfalls.

To represent this region of perpetual ice and snow, with its tenacious flora and fauna, Parks Canada has identified a Natural Area of Canadian Significance.

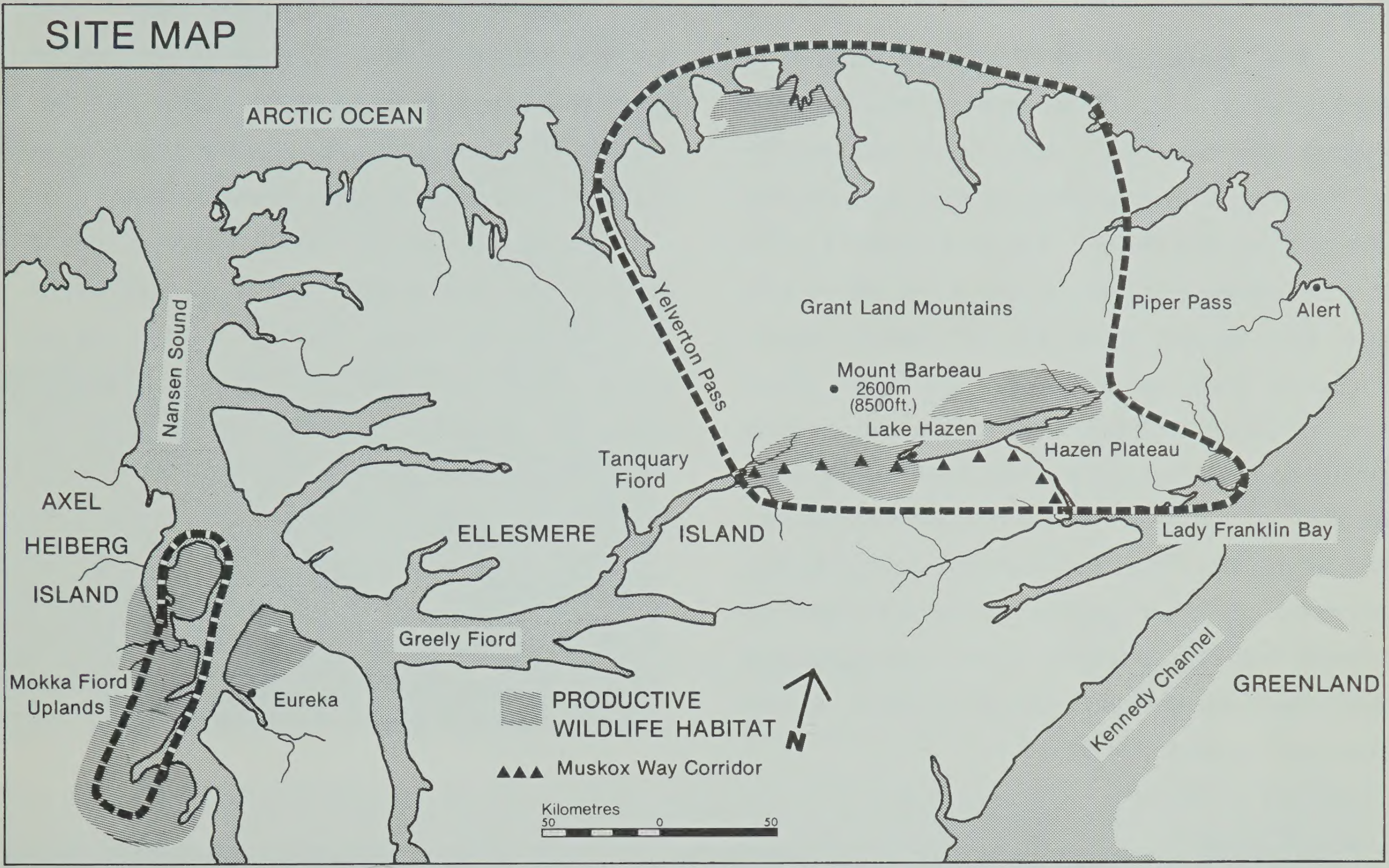
This area of interest is located on the Mokka Fiord Uplands of Axel Heiberg Island, and on a portion of Ellesmere Island that is dominated by the Grant Land Mountains and Lake Hazen Plateau.

The combined area of these two sites would be about 33 800 km^2 (13,500 sq. miles); however, their final boundaries have not been determined.

1 Rock formations near Buchanan Lake

2 Grant Land Ice Cap.

1


SITE MAP
ARCTIC OCEAN
Nansen Sound
AXEL
HEIBERG
ISLAND
Mokka Fiord
Uplands
Eureka
ELLESMERE
ISLAND
Greely Fiord
Tanquary
Fiord
Yelverton Pass
Grant Land Mountains
Mount Barbeau
2600m
(8500ft.)
Lake Hazen
Hazen Plateau
Piper Pass
Alert
Lady Franklin Bay
Kennedy Channel
GREENLAND
▨ PRODUCTIVE
WILDLIFE HABITAT
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The Land

The landscape of Ellesmere Island is dominated by ice. There are several hundred glaciers in the area, some up to 40 km (25 miles) long, with long tongues that stretch into the valleys and fiords. Mount Barbeau (2 600 m), the highest of the Grant Land Mountains and the highest mountain in eastern North America, towers over massive ice fields which stretch almost continuously to the passes that form the east and west boundaries of the area of interest. The north coast is broken by ice-strewn fiords. "Ice shelves" that cling to the northern coast are thought to be the result of sea-ice freezing to the shoreline and remaining fast owing to the combination of great winter cold and low summer melt.

South of Mount Barbeau lies Lake Hazen and the Hazen Plateau, a rolling stream-cut plain, that varies in height from 165 m (500 ft.) near Lake Hazen to cliffs greater than 900 m (3,000 ft.) overlooking Lady Franklin Bay.

Mokka Fiord on Axel Heiberg Island differs from the rugged fiords of the Grant Land Mountains area. Bounded at the sea by gentle slopes, the land rises gradually to the prominent hills of the uplands, creating a more hospitable terrain for a large concentration of the few species that inhabit the high arctic.

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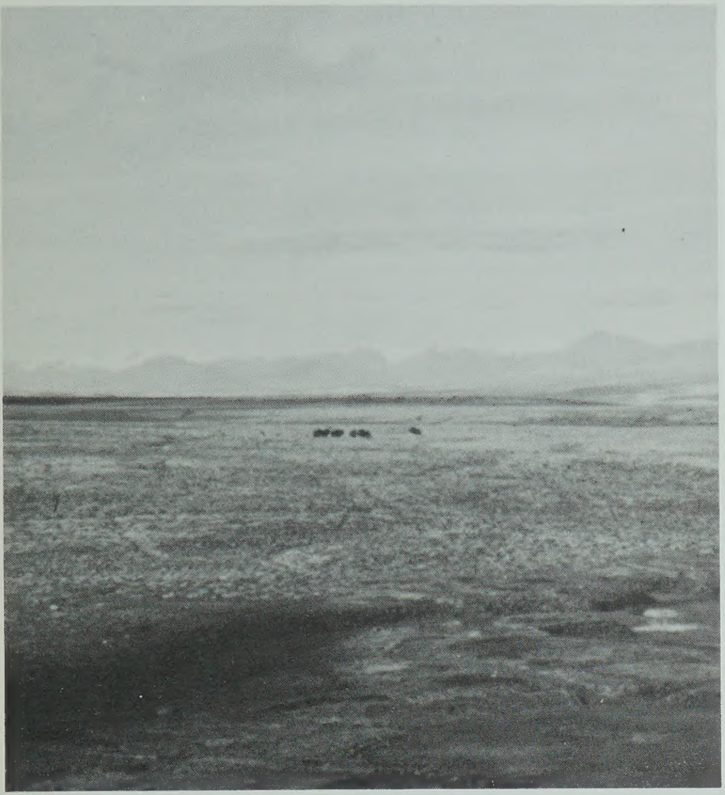

1 Archer Fiord

2 Hazen Plateau

3 Henrietta Nesmith Glacier

3

Wildlife and Vegetation

Owing to its long harsh winters, brief cool summers and very low precipitation, most of the area that is not covered in ice and snow is polar desert, windswept and arid, with few plants and consequently little animal life.

Yet, despite the severe climate, there are a few sheltered spots moist enough to support vegetation and maintain a vigorous animal community. The areas around Mokka Fiord and Lake Hazen are examples of such spots.

These sites are known for their large populations of Arctic hare, which often gather in the hundreds. Small herds of musk oxen roam where there is suitable food, and Peary caribou can be found in small groups throughout the region. Wolves, Arctic fox and polar bears are the primary predators in the area.

About 30 species of birds visit the Islands, but their lives are in such a precarious balance in this forbidding terrain that they do not always breed every year.

1 Polar wolf

2 Peary caribou

3 Arctic hare herd

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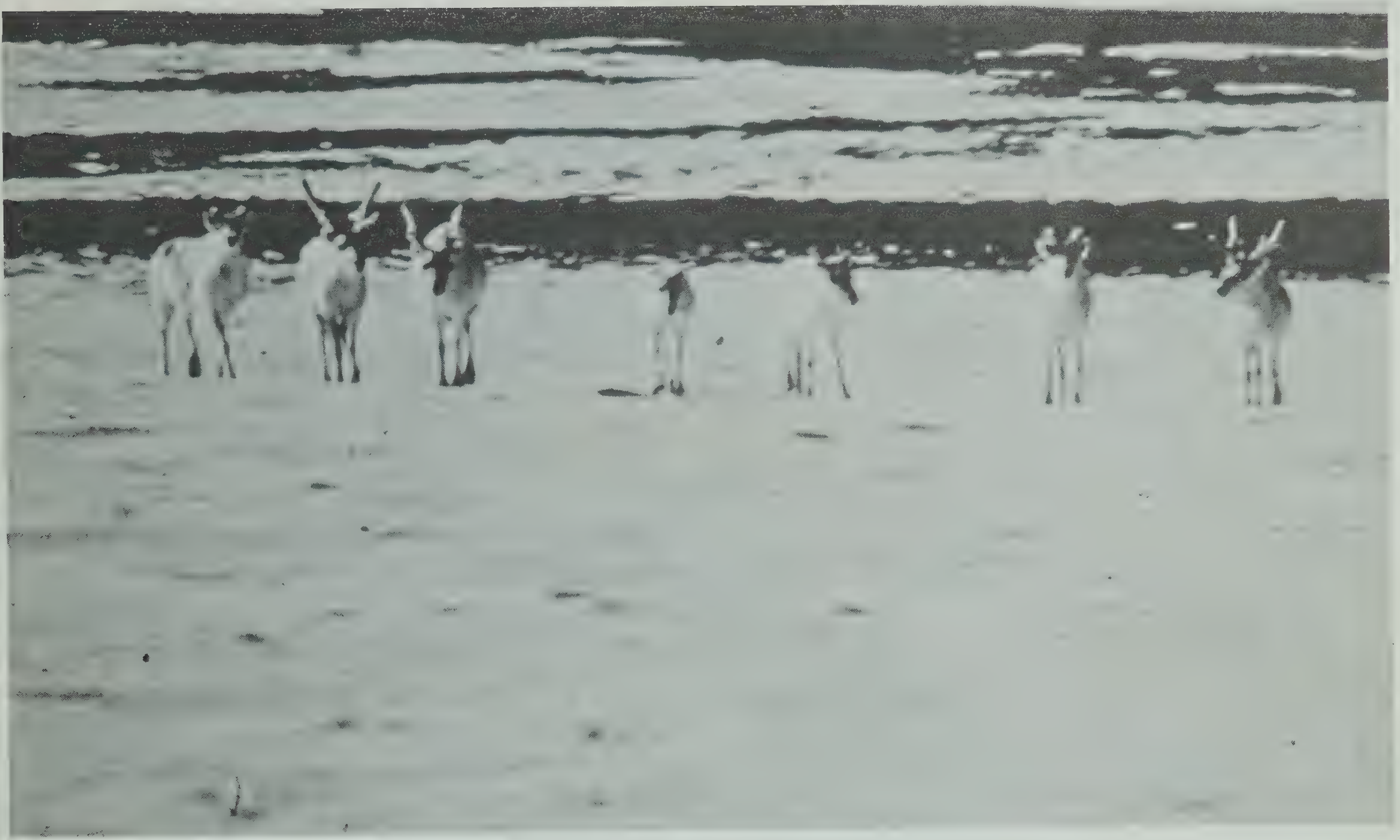
2



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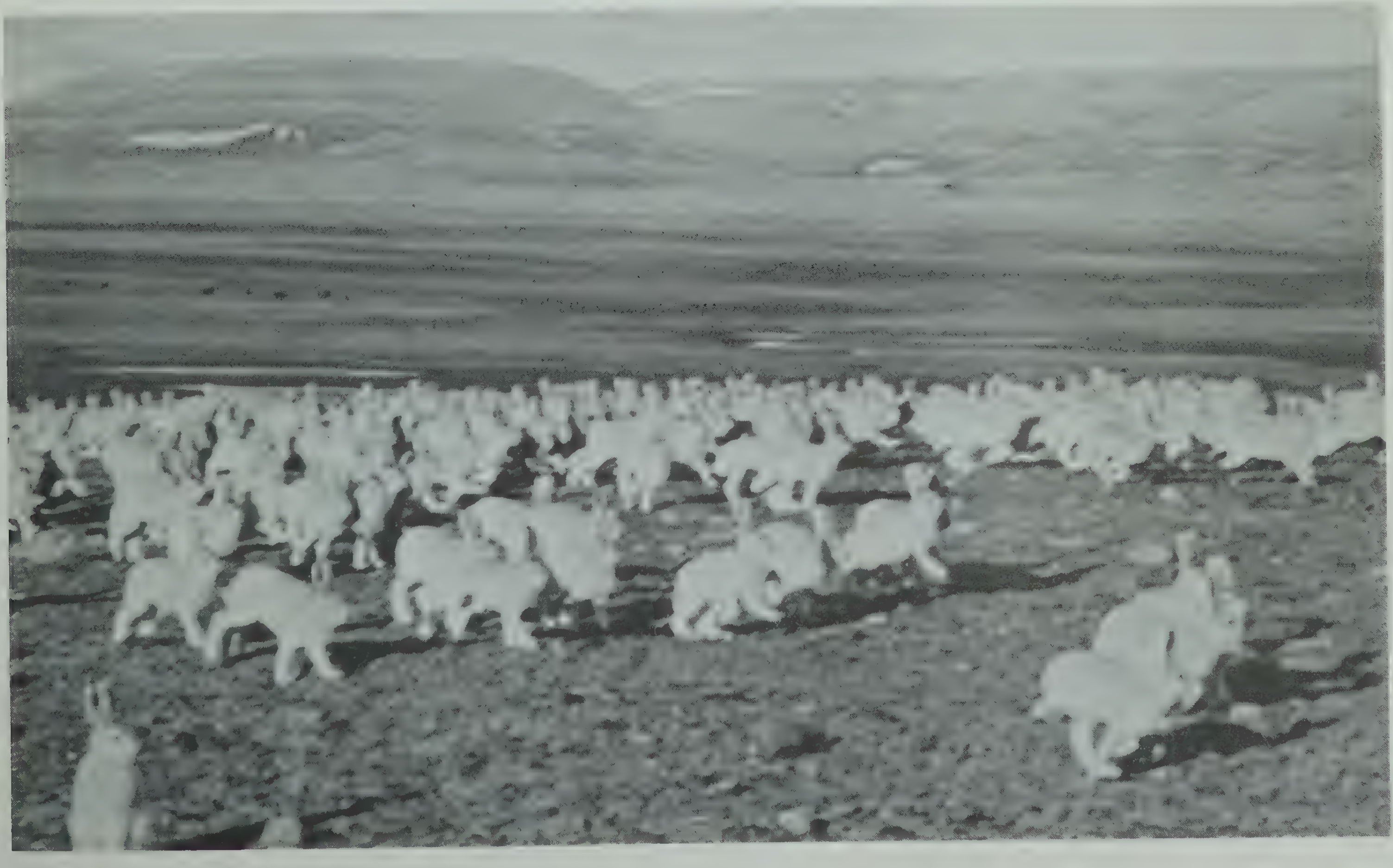

Human History

Remains of ancient cultures discovered in the area have allowed historians to piece together the story of a migratory people who, about 4 000 years ago, crossed Ellesmere Island on their way from the mainland barren grounds to Greenland. It was warmer then, and it is thought that these hunters followed the musk oxen as they migrated north. The route they travelled is now called The Musk Ox Way. Crossing the area, the route is of great interest to archaeologists, for it promises to yield valuable evidence of prehistoric times on this continent.

The first Europeans to reach the area were searching for the Sir John Franklin Expedition, lost in 1845, on its search for the Northwest Passage. Expeditions in 1854 and 1871 began mapping Ellesmere Island, and in 1875 the H.M.S. Alert and Discovery established a base at Fort Conger from which to make sled journeys inland and across to Greenland. Subsequent expeditions also used the quarters at Fort Conger and remains of the buildings are still perched on the rocky terrain.

Today the closest Inuit community is Grise Fiord, the northernmost settlement in Canada, about 400 km (240 miles) from Mokka Fiord and 560 km (350 miles) from Tanquary Fiord. Occasionally hunting parties from this area travel as far as Lake Hazen, but generally these portions of Ellesmere and Axel Heiberg Islands are not used by the Inuit.

The north coast of Ellesmere Island was not mapped completely until 1906. From that time the area has attracted the daring and the adventurous, mountain climbers and modern-day explorers, attempting to reach the North Pole.

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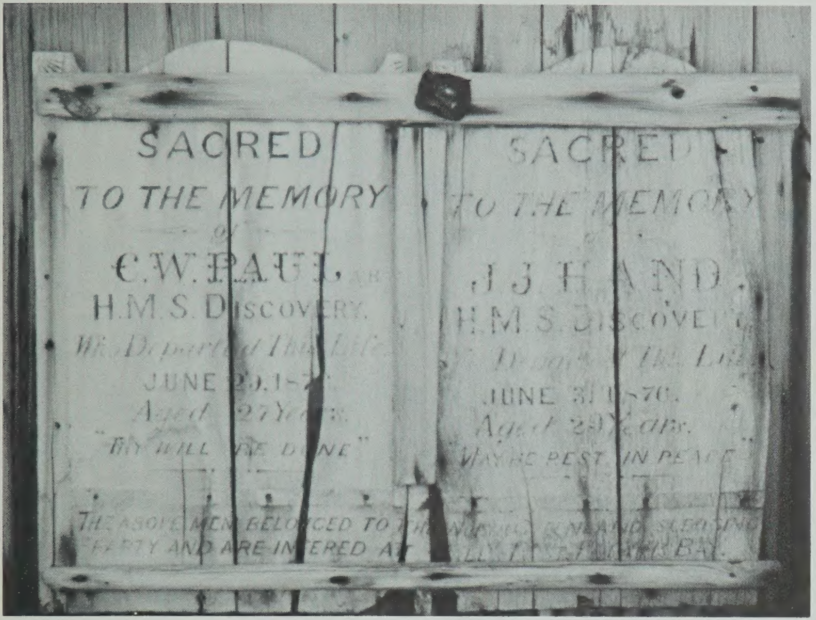

1 Fort Conger

2 Headboards at Fort Conger

3 Archaeological site at Lake Hazen

3

1

2

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AUTHOR

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1 Escarpments near Tanquary Fiord

2 Lake Hazen

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If you would like to receive or contribute information on any of the six areas or to comment on their establishment as parks, please write to Parks Canada at one of the following addresses:

Director,
Parks Canada Prairie Region,
114 Garry Street,
WINNIPEG R3G 1G1
Manitoba.

or

Director,
National Parks Branch,
Parks Canada,
400 Laurier Avenue, West,
OTTAWA K1A 0H4
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